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TOPIC

"GOING INTO THE LINES": CENTRALIZATION AND THE PERCEPTION
LAND SHORTAGE IN THE CHIWESHE RESERVE, 1940-1944

by

Leslie BESSANT

Presented to the Henderson Seminar of the Department of History,
University of Zimbabwe.

1.
The land question in colonial Zimbabwe has been the subject of many historical studies. Probably the best known is Robin Palmer's Land and Racial Domination, in which he discusses how white settlers manipulated land policy from 1890 to 1936 to protect themselves the competing black peasants. Whites pushed blacks off the most fertile lands in the country, and pushed them away from markets, transport centers and railways.¹ Paul Mosley takes a different approach in his book The Settler Economies; he argues that these land policies created a land shortage for black peasants during roughly the same period, and that in turn peasants adopted agricultural innovations in order to hold onto their place in the agricultural market.² Whatever his or her perspective, historians of colonial Zimbabwe agree that access to land is a crucial factor in Zimbabwe's agricultural and economic development.

What remains unsaid, though, is how the black peasantry perceptions of land and land shortage changed from the 1920s, when expanding white farm occupation began pushing black subsistence cultivators off farms and into the reserves, up to the 1960s, when land hunger combined with other factors to push the peasantry out of a static discontent into the revolution. This essay will examine how one section of the peasantry, the people living in the Chiweshe Reserve, first came to think that they faced land shortage.

Five main groups made up the population of the Chiweshe Reserve: the people of Makope, Negomo, Chiweshe, Hwata, and Nyachuru. Makope's people were the first of the five groups to settle in the Mazowe area. They claim to have received land from the Mutapa state around 1750.³ The Makope country was much larger than the present boundaries of the communal lands, stretching to the north, east, and west. The next group to arrive in the area was Negomo's. Traditionally, the nucleus of Negomo's people were Rozvi warriors who had come north looking for the murderer of the Rozvi Mambo's wife. The party failed to catch the murderer, but Negomo, the group's leader, became Makope's son-in-law and was given a country to the south of Makope's lands.⁴ Nyachuru's history is less clear than Makope's and Negomo's, but the present dynasty seems to have come to power sometime after Makope established himself; the original Nyachuru lands were in the area of present-day Concession.⁵ Chiweshe and Hwata, the last groups to arrive, were two "brothers" who migrated north from Buhera, finally winding up in the Mazowe Valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶

From 1920 on, white settlement pushed all these groups into the Chiweshe Reserve. Most were evicted by farm managers; Hwata's people were moved off the Mazoe Citrus Estate in 1922,⁷ and a group of Makope's people were forced to move into the reserve from the Unyukwes Ranch in 1925, because the farm management felt that they were not complying with the terms of their labour agreement.⁸ In bit-by-bit fashion, the African population of the western Mazowe District was pushed into the Chiweshe Reserve.

Owing to the piecemeal nature of movement into Chiweshe, people settled where they chose, sometimes in the country of another chief.⁹ Often they settled in unoccupied areas, and so they thought they did not need anyone's permission.¹⁰ As the movement into Chiweshe continued, the boundaries between chiefs' countries became vague. For instance, Chief Hwata, one of the paramount chiefs of the area, never established a country of his own in Chiweshe. Instead the Native Commissioner gave him part of Makope's country, and also part of Makope's population, to rule, in 1940. Some of Hwata's own followers had settled in the Chinamora Reserve, but most followed the chief, or perhaps preceded him, to the Chiweshe Reserve.¹²

In contrast to the "traditional" pattern of land allocation, where the chief allocates land to the ward head, the ward head allocates land to the village headman, and the village headman allocates fields to the villager, settlement in Chiweshe just "happened": whole villages, based on family ties, would relocate somewhere in Chiweshe, apparently at their discretion, and apparently making whatever necessary ritual arrangements after the fact.¹³ The people who moved into Chiweshe knew that they had collectively and individually lost land to the whites; but in the 1930s, no one suffered from want of land. As one man put it, "The place was empty. This Chiweshe during that time was scarcely populated."¹⁴

When people moved into Chiweshe, they were selling some produce, but mostly they farmed for subsistence.¹⁵ During the 1930s, though, they became more and more involved in producing for the market. The transformation came about because of Major F.J. Wane's maize marketing scheme, a program he established during his time as Native Commissioner at Concession. In this scheme, Wane took advantage of a loop-hole in the Maize Control Act of 1930 which allowed the nascent Chiweshe peasantry to deliver their maize to a depot in the reserve, and then Wane delivered the maize directly to the Maize Control Board at Concession, thus getting better prices than if the Chiweshe growers had to market their grain through the stores in the reserve. Prior to Wane's marketing scheme, Chiweshe people had had to sell their maize through these local stores; selling to traders had the double disadvantage of getting low prices for one's maize, and having to take goods in exchange for maize, since traders often refused to pay in cash.

People in Chiweshe rapidly expanded their acreages under maize in response to Wane's marketing scheme. In fact, people expanded their cultivation so rapidly that E.D. Alvord, the Agriculturist for the Instruction of Natives, and his assistant became worried that the Chiweshe peasants were recklessly plowing up thousands of acres. The assistant agriculturist reported in 1938 that:

"Some Natives have the idea of being progressive farmers by ploughing these areas all up and down the slope, planting maize every year and reaping very small returns from it. Other Natives have no land or very small patches so naturally never reap sufficient grain to see them through the year. If these farmers were made to till smaller areas and a rotation of crops enforced everyone would be much happier because there would be sufficient land for all and better yields reaped ... these Natives are running wild with their ploughs and ruining the Reserve.¹⁶

The assistant agriculturist's report was the first official mention of land shortage in Chiweshe.

Alvord's answer to the land situation in Chiweshe was to centralize the reserve, dividing it into grazing and arable areas. Alvord intended to use centralization to limit the amount of arable land under cultivation.¹⁷ By limiting and demarcating arable and grazing, Alvord's department could make sure that everyone had access to land, and thereby eliminate the land shortage which his assistant had noted in his report. Limiting the amount of arable land would also provide an extra incentive for people in Chiweshe to intensify their farming methods, which was also one of Alvord's goals.¹⁸ Finally, by limiting and concentrating the arable land, centralization would also increase the amount of pasture land,¹⁹ but this was not a primary concern in Chiweshe, since the reserve was not considered overstocked in 1938.²⁰ In order to demarcate the grazing lands from the arable, people were told to build their houses along the line which separated the two blocks of land. The new settlement pattern gave centralization its popular name: "the lines".

Surveyors chose the best soils with the least chance of erosion as the arable blocks.²¹ Everyone with a traditional right to land was granted a plot in an arable block.²² In cases where the NC thought that land was plentiful, block allocations were made to ward heads, who then allocated plots to their followers. Where land was scarce, the NC or the agricultural demonstrators made individual allocations to each person.²³

Wane objected to the idea of centralization when Alvord first suggested it in 1938.²⁴ But by May 1939, Wane had completely reversed his position, and he asked the CNC to set up a program to centralize Chiweshe as soon as possible.²⁵ Wane now believed that "some of the more pushful and advanced natives [were] grabbing large areas of land to the detriment of their fellows."²⁶ Alvord supported the idea of land shortage in Chiweshe when he claimed in June 1939 that "Many Natives can find no land on which to plough as others claim so much."²⁷

People in Chiweshe were not overjoyed at the prospect of centralization. In the same letter of June 1939 where Alvord complains of land shortage, he also admits that the reaction to his explanation of centralization was far from enthusiastic: "no one expressed objections."²⁸ He closes this letter by advising that Chiweshe be centralized "no matter what the people wish."²⁹ Wane also thought that people would refuse to co-operate; he put-off his explanation of centralization until after the final Msize Control Board pay-out had come, so that his audience would be in "good humour".³⁰ The lackluster response which Alvord got, and the opposition which Wane expected, hardly seem like the sort of reaction one would expect to a plan which was supposed to save most of the community from ruin at the hands of a few.

In fact, people in Chiweshe neither refused nor welcomed the idea of centralization.³¹ There was no reason for them to take a stand either way, because prior to centralization, the people in Chiweshe did not perceive any land shortage.³² For the traditional land authorities, the headmen, sub-chiefs, and chiefs, all land was considered as potential arable. Even if there were 100,000 acres in cultivation in Chiweshe in 1940, an absurdly high estimate, that would still leave 110,000 acres of pasture, bush, and waste which could be allocated as needed.³³ Today, men who were already farming in 1940 remember land as being sufficient before centralization.³⁴

Alvord's department surveyed Chiweshe in August 1939 and set out sixteen arable blocks.³⁵ All cultivation was to be confined to these areas. Before Wane could act on the survey, though, he left the Native Affairs Department to take command of the Rhodesian African Rifles,³⁶ and Lionel Powys-Jones replaced Wane as the NC, Concession, in 1940. Powys-Jones waited a year to get his bearings, and then began enthusiastically to carry out centralization in 1941.³⁷

The centralization team began in southern Chiweshe and proceeded northwards. Messengers from the NC's office would go to a village and tell the headman to gather his people together on a certain date and get them ready to move

into the line. On that day either Andrew Midzi, who was the senior agricultural demonstrator in Chiweshe, or another agricultural demonstrator would arrive with a team peggers. The team would first peg the line which would demarcate the fields. Then, Midzi or the demonstrator handling that village would walk the line and allocate permanent homestead to each man with a registration card, driving a peg at the man's new "address". If he came to the end of the line before everyone received a homestead, he turned around and went back down the other side of the line, allocating homesteads in the same way.³⁸

In southern Chiweshe, where Alvord, Wane, and Powys-Jones believed land shortage to be most acute, the centralization team also allocated permanent fields to each family. Each registered tax-payer received six acres for himself and two acres for each of his wives.³⁹ In theory, elderly dependents were also supposed to receive one acre,⁴⁰ but it is unclear whether this happened in Chiweshe. People were also encouraged to keep their cattle holdings to six head or less, but the demonstrators never implemented any cattle restrictions.⁴¹

As the centralization team moved further north in the reserve, the pattern of land allocation changed. At Shopo, the team pegged the lines, allocated homesteads, and then left the allocation of fields entirely to the local headmen.⁴² Further north at Chaona, the demonstrators were even more flexible: they pegged the line separating the arable from the grazing, and simply told the local people which side to farm.⁴³ The fact that the centralization teams acted less specifically the further north they went indicates that Powys-Jones thought that the lesser population pressure in the north did not call for individual field allocations,⁴⁴ but Powys-Jones' own reports on centralization in Chiweshe imply that the entire reserve was to receive individual field allocations.⁴⁵ Whatever Powys-Jones' thinking control over land allocation was much looser in northern Chiweshe.

Just like before centralization, most people in Chiweshe still did not believe there was a land shortage after moving into the lines. Almost everyone received different fields from the ones they had previously worked.⁴⁶ When a man first got his new field, if he was displeased with it he could appeal to the NC.⁴⁷ Some men complained about having their fields taken away from them,⁴⁸ but most people felt that the allocations were sufficient for subsistence, and small if one wanted to grow for sale. No one refused to move into the lines, because no one believed he could refuse.⁴⁹ More to the point, no one saw any point in refusing. Moving into the lines was a hardship, since one had to build a new house and pull down the old one,⁵⁰ and sometimes one had to "struggle" to get enough cash because the fields were small.⁵¹

but people did not think of this as land shortage. There was enough land for all families, even those who were absent from the reserve. As one man put it, "When the lines were introduced, people were still few ... Acreages allocated [were sufficient] at first when we were fathers alone, each and every one was given six acres. Your wife got four [sic, two] acres. Because the country was big and the people had not multiplied."⁵²

People began to see a land shortage, though, almost immediately after centralization was in place. They realized that no one had set aside fields for the young men and women who were now marrying and looking to establish their own homes. Each young man went with his father to the village head to ask for a field near his father's field. But suitable fields were seldom found, because of the close allocation of homesteads and fields in the lines.⁵³

The young men now found themselves having to get land wherever they could. Sometimes young men were able to take over land which their fathers had left, as in one case where a young man took over his father's fields after the father left to move to Mt. Darwin.⁵⁴ But for the most part there were no available fields, and fathers had to accommodate their sons in their own fields and homesteads, in a sort of parody of the pre-centralization settlement pattern.⁵⁵

Now the fields began to look small indeed, when a father had to share his lands with his sons. Complaints began to arise. Two men who received fields during centralization remembered the plight of their sons' generation like this:

We saw that our offspring had nowhere to settle after marrying. When we asked what was to be done, they [probably the village head and the demonstrators] would say they had nowhere to put them. We would then go to the NC and this would bring about discontent.⁵⁶

Those who got married later on are there. This [centralization] was not done long ago - 1942. They are these people who are now grumbling saying they don't have lines.⁵⁷

Men in the sons' generation have different memories of centralization from their fathers. The fathers, who had no trouble getting fields during centralization, remember the fields as being small,⁵⁸ but the sons, who often had to settle on the fathers' fields, remember the fields which their fathers received as adequate, and that land was plentiful in their father's younger days.⁵⁹

So, in just a few years, people in Chiweshe totally changed the way they thought about land. Before centralization, access to land was not an issue among the people in Chiweshe; only Wane, Alverd, and then Powys-Jones thought of Chiweshe as having a land shortage, and they saw centralization as the answer

to land shortage. However, centralization seems to have mainly accomplished a crystallization of the land shortage by creating "reserves" within the reserve. People quickly filled these "reserves"; by 1944, people were already complaining that now there was land shortage. "We are too crowded in this Reserve. Not much ground remains under each headman's arable area."⁶⁰ Their complaint fell on deaf ears.

All of the interviews were conducted by Mr. Elyis Muringai, unless otherwise noted; Mr. Muringai also translated the interviews. His work is excellent, and I appreciate it deeply.

All primary source materials come from the National Archives of Zimbabwe. Notes 7, 11, and 12 refer to files which the Ministry of Local Government and Town Planning have allowed me to use in my research, even though they are still closed under the thirty-year rule. I thank the Ministry of Local Government and Town Planning, and the National Archives for allowing me to use these records; in particular, I thank Mr. J.D. White and Mr J. McCarthy for their help in this matter.

- 1) Robin Palmer, Land and Racial Domination (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), passim.
- 2) Paul Mosley, The Settler Economies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chapters 1, 2, and 3.
- 3) D.N. Beach, The Shona and Zimbabwe (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1980), p.137.
- 4) Interview with Alexander Mapondera, 24 June 1977; interviewed by Mr. Dawson Munjari, National Archives Oral History collection, AOH/13.
- 5) Beach, pp. 137 - 138.
- 6) Conversation with J.B. Matswetu (14 Oct 1984).
- 7) NC, Concession to PNC, Northern Mashonaland, 9 Nov 1957, in LAN/20 Agricultural Land Husbandry, Chiweshe, Box 84267.
- 8) NC, Concession to CNC, 31 March 1925 and 7 April 1925, S622/1925.
- 9) Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1940, S1563/1940; and interviews with Kaviya (11 Dec 1984), Paul Mahiya Matswetu (10 Dec 1984), Meda (14 Dec 1984), and Mukwenya (12 Dec 1984).
- 10) Interview with Chakanyuka Chindawi (12 Dec 1984).
- 11) Chiweshe T.T.L. Delineation Report, 1965, Box 84277.
- 12) NC, Concession to PNC, Northern Mashonaland, 9 Nov 1957, in LAN/20 Agricultural Land Husbandry, Chiweshe, Box 84267.
- 13) Interviews with Paul Mahiya Matswetu (10 Dec 1984), and Robson Muchadakuenda (5 Dec 1984 and 17 Feb 1985).
- 14) Interviews with Chakanyuka Chindawi (12 Dec 1984).
- 15) The paragraph is based on Wolfgang Depcke's paper.
- 16) CNC to the NC, Concession, 16 May 1938, quoting the assistant agriculturist's report, S1059/1938.
- 17) Report of the Agriculturist for the Instruction of Natives, 1928, S138/72.
- 18) ibid.
- 19) ibid.
- 20) Final Report on Centralization in Chiweshe, Circular 310 of 1950, S1060/3.

- 21) E.D. Alvord, oral evidence to the Native Trade and Production Commission, 1944, ZBJ1/1/1, p.113.
- 22) ibid., p.113.
- 23) ibid.
- 24) NC, Concession to CNC, 29 June 1938, S1059/1938.
- 25) NC, Concession to CNC, 3 May 1939, S1542/S10.
- 26) ibid.
- 27) E.D. Alvord, minute to CNC, 7 June 1939, S1542/S10.
- 28) ibid.
- 29) ibid.
- 30) NC, Concession to CNC, 14 July 1939, S1542/S10.
- 31) Interviews with Chakanyuka Chindawi(12 Dec 1984), Chiwocha(17 Dec 1984), Chemsora(17 Dec 1984), Cigarette (10 Dec 1984), Philemon Gatsi (7 Dec 1984), Ganda Chivandire(19 Dec 1984), Kambambura(13 Dec 1984), Aaron Karombe (14 Dec 1984), Kaviya(11 Dec 1984), Meda (14 Dec 1984), Mukwenya(12 Dec 1984), Jonas Mungate(12 Dec 1984), Canaan Shamuyarira (18 Dec 1984). For the most part, people seem to have accepted centralization with a grain of salt, or as another of life's problems.
- 32) Interviews with Chakanyuka Chindawi(12 Dec 1984) and William Shangwa (18 Dec 1984).
- 33) This calculation of acreage under crops is based on Powys-Jones' estimates. He believed that 150,000 bags of maize were produced in Chiweshe in 1940, and that the average yield was 1.5 bags per acre; therefore, he must have believed 100,000 acres to have been under the plough. Annual Report, Mazoe District, 1940, S1563/1940.
- 34) Interviews with Chakanyuka Chindawi (12 Dec 1984) and Sheniwa Kanyemba (12 Dec 1984).
- 35) E.D. Alvord to CNC, 5 Aug 1939, S1542/S10.
- 36) J. Maclean, The Guardians(Bulawayo: Books of Rhodesia, 1974), p.230.
- 37) Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1940, S1563/1940, and Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1941, S1563/1941.
- 38) We found no one in southern and central Chiweshe who had a different account of centralization.
- 39) Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1941, S1563/1941.
- 40) E.D. Alvord, oral evidence given to the Native Trade and Production Commission, 1944, ZBJ/1/1/1, p.113.
- 41) Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1940, S1563/1940; Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1941, S1563/1941; Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1942, S1563/1942; Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1943, S1051/1943; Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1944, S1563/1944. Also interview with Chiwocha (17 Dec 1984). People in Chiweshe did not respond to the government propaganda, though.

- 42) Interviews with Ganda Chivandire (19 Dec 1984) and William Shangwa (19 Dec 1984).
- 43) Interview with Dakunzwa Gwanzura and Mutero (19 Dec 1984).
- 44) E.D. Alvor, oral evidence given to the Native Trade and Production Commission, 1944, ZBJ 1/1/1, p.113.
- 45) L. Powys-Jones, oral evidence given to the Native Trade and Production Commission, 1944, ZBJ 1/1/1, p.455.
- 46) The only exception we found was Chiwocha, who kept his former fields after centralization; interview with Chiwocha (17 Dec 1984).
- 47) Interviews with Marufu (11 Dec 1984) and Josephat Nyakotyo (7 Dec 1984).
- 48) Annual District Report, Mazoe District, 1942, S1563/1942; and interview with Meda (14 Dec 1984).
- 49) Almost everyone interviewed said this. For especially strong opinions see interviews with Chiwocha (17 Dec 1984), Chomsora (17 Dec 1984), Aaron Karembe (14 Dec 1984), Kaviya (11 Dec 1984), and Meda (14 Dec 1984).
- 50) Interview with Jonas Mungate (12 Dec 1984).
- 51) Interview with Chomsora (17 Dec 1984).
- 52) Interview with Chakanyuka Chindawi (12 Dec 1984).
- 53) Interviews with Chomsora (17 Dec 1984), Cigarette (10 Dec 1984), Philemon Gatsi (7 Dec 1984), Misheck Jarata (6 Dec 1984), Jacob Nzara (13 Dec 1984).
- 54) Interview with Jacob Nzara (13 Dec 1984).
- 55) Interviews with Chiwocha (17 Dec 1984), Chomsora (17 Dec 1984), Cigarette (10 Dec 1984), Philemon Gatsi (7 Dec 1984), Misheck Jarata (6 Dec 1984), Jacob Nzara (13 Dec 1984).
- 56) Interview with Cigarette (10 Dec 1984).
- 57) Interview with Chomsora (17 Dec 1984).
- 58) For instance, interviews with Cigarette (10 Dec 1984), Philemon Gatsi (7 Dec 1984), and Misheck Jarata (6 Dec 1984).
- 59) Interviews with Aaron Karembe (14 Dec 1984) and Josephat Nyakotyo (7 Dec 1984).
- 60) Andrew Midzi, oral evidence given to the Native Trade and Production Commission, 1944, ZBJ 1/1/1, p.489.



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